

# Tips for Reading Extensively

**E**XTENSIVE READING HAS THE POTENTIAL TO HELP ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS become better readers and make improvements in other aspects of their English skills. However, most students are not accustomed to the autonomy accorded by extensive reading. In addition, they may be used to struggling through short, boring, and extremely difficult texts, which, for many learners, entails painfully careful reading and constant use of a dictionary. In short, language learners may not understand the language learning value of reading easy, interesting material.

In extensive reading, English language learners read large quantities of easy material in English. They read for information and enjoyment, with the primary goal of achieving a general, overall understanding of the reading material. Students select their own reading material and are encouraged to stop reading if the material is not interesting or is too hard; over time, students are also encouraged to expand their *reading comfort zone*—the range of materials they can read easily and with confidence. To capture these aspects of extensive reading, Day and

Bamford suggest that the motto of extensive reading be “*reading gain without reading pain*” (1998, 121; emphasis in the original).

There are several reasons why it is beneficial to encourage language learners to read extensively. Studies show that when students read extensively, they not only improve their reading fluency, but they also build new vocabulary knowledge and expand their understanding of words they knew before. Additionally, extensive reading can help students write better, as well as improve their listening and speaking abilities. And perhaps the best result is that students develop positive attitudes toward reading in English and increased motivation to study it.

Teachers have an important role to play in helping their students get the most out of extensive reading. As Day and Bamford (2002) point out, teachers need to introduce their students to extensive reading and provide essential guidance as they read extensively. In this article, we offer ten tips that teachers can give to students when they engage in extensive reading. The title for each tip is addressed directly to the learner, whereas the rationale and instructional advice are written to you, the teacher. We discuss the rationale for each tip and suggest ways to present these tips to your students. We recommend that you present them before students begin to read extensively and then revisit them periodically throughout the semester or school year.

#### **Tip 1: Read, read, and read some more.**

This is perhaps the most important piece of advice that you can give your students. You might want to introduce this tip by emphasizing to your students that we learn to read by reading; this is true for both a first or second language. The more students read, the better readers they become.

When you encourage your students to read, read, and read, you might want to point out that reading extensively can:

- Help them read faster and understand more.
- Help them to read in meaningful phrases, rather than word-by-word.
- Increase their confidence in their reading.
- Increase vocabulary knowledge.
- Consolidate grammatical knowledge.

- Help improve writing proficiency and oral fluency.

#### **Tip 2: Read easy books.**

Generally, it is hard to read books that have many unknown or difficult words. Frequently encountering challenging vocabulary can be frustrating, if not discouraging. The same can be said for the level of grammatical and organizational difficulty of books. So it is very important for students to choose books that they can read quickly and easily. This will increase their confidence and help them to become more comfortable with the process of reading in the foreign language.

Unfortunately, many students (and perhaps some teachers) are conditioned to believe that they must read books that are difficult, that the only way to learn to read is by reading material that is beyond their capabilities. Day and Bamford label this the “*macho maxim of second language reading instruction: no reading pain, no reading gain*” (1998, 92; emphasis in the original). This is the wrong approach. When learners read a lot of easy books, it allows them to become more fluent, effective readers. In addition, they are able to learn new words and phrases, over time, while enjoying what they are reading. To help wean students from the *macho maxim*, ask them to reflect on their experiences of learning to read in their first language—what types of materials did they read? Most likely standardized testing material was not in their selection of bedtime stories.

You can help your students select material at the appropriate level—books well within their reading comfort zone. Ask them to scan two or three pages of a book, looking for words they do not recognize. If there are more than four or five difficult or unknown words on a page, the book is probably too difficult for extensive reading.

Even after your students choose a book that appears to be appropriate, they may find that they are re-reading a few grammatically difficult sentences to try to figure out the meaning. If this is the case, the book is probably too difficult, so they should find another.

Extensive reading materials can be any material in English that is easy enough for your students to read with overall comprehension. Depending on the abilities of your stu-

dents and the resources available to you, such materials may include children's books, comic books, or online texts. Additionally, a useful source of *language learner literature*, reading material written for an audience of language learners, is graded readers. Graded readers are simply books, fiction and nonfiction, in which the content is controlled to match the language ability of learners. All the major publishers have graded readers. Hill (2001) provides an insightful review of readers published in the United Kingdom.

**Tip 3: Read interesting books.**

Because students need to read many books, it is important that they are interested in and enjoy what they are reading. If the learners are excited about their books, they won't want to put them down. Additionally, they will be more likely to attend to the content (meaning) of the text, rather than merely focusing on grammatical aspects. If your students do not find their books interesting or exciting, advise them to stop and find other books they may enjoy more.

At the same time, you might also want to point out that they should not give up on a book prematurely. Some books *start slowly*.

**Tip 4: Reread books you found particularly interesting.**

Reading books a second or third time is useful for several reasons. Having already read a book once, students will be able to read it more fluently the second time. This helps build vocabulary knowledge as well as confidence, and this, in turn, leads to increases in reading rate. Also, reading gains aside, it is fun to reread a favorite book!

**Tip 5: Read for general understanding.**

When students read extensively, it is not necessary to read for 100 percent comprehension. On the contrary, they should simply read for general, overall understanding. This means that they should be able to follow the general storyline and grasp the main ideas of the text. In extensive reading, the aim is to read a great many books, so it is in the learners' best interest not to struggle over every detail and worry about the exact meaning of every word or phrase.

To reinforce this idea, you could ask your students to think about reading in their native

language (or, if they do not read much in their native languages, ask the students to think about watching television or movies). Most likely, they do not fret over every detail in their native language, so they should not expect to understand every word when they read extensively in English.

Another way to encourage reading for general understanding is to remind students that they are reading for pleasure, and for benefits such as increasing fluency and vocabulary knowledge. You might want to stress that there is no penalty for not understanding every detail because they will not be tested.

**Tip 6: Ignore unknown or difficult words. Skip them and continue reading.**

Although extensive reading material should be easy for students, they will inevitably encounter unknown or difficult words on occasion. Students do not need to understand every word. Often, they can ignore words they do not know and still maintain a general understanding of the passage. Sometimes they can guess the meaning of words from the context.

You can be of particular importance here by helping learners get used to living with a bit of ambiguity when they read. One way to do this is to have students skim a page or two of their books, circling any words they do not understand. Next, have your students read those same pages, encouraging them to focus on the general meaning and ignore any circled words. After they have finished, find out how successful they were by asking general questions about their texts, such as: Who are the characters? Where are they? What are they doing? Most likely, students will grasp the overall meaning, despite encountering a few unfamiliar words. If a student is unsuccessful, then it is likely the book is too difficult. (Recall Tip 2—if the book has more than five unknown words on a page, then it is probably too difficult.)

**Tip 7: Avoid using dictionaries.**

Although students often resort to using their dictionaries whenever they encounter new words, convince them to break the dictionary habit. Stopping two or three times per page to look up words in the dictionary is laborious and time-consuming, and it can distract students from reading for general understanding.

It can be difficult for students to ignore unknown or difficult words when they have their dictionaries right beside them. Some students, when they engage in extensive reading, make a point of putting their dictionaries across the room, out of the way. Thus they will be less inclined to reach for their dictionaries when they come across unknown words.

But sometimes it is not possible, or advisable, to avoid the use of dictionaries. There are times when not knowing the meaning of a word prevents overall understanding, or the unknown word reoccurs frequently in the text. In such situations, tell your students to use a dictionary.

**Tip 8: Expand your reading comfort zone.**

As your students read more and more, their reading fluency will increase and their reading comfort zones will expand. As learners increase the size of their reading comfort zones, they will be able to read books that were initially too difficult.

To assist students with expanding their reading comfort zones, it is important that you are familiar with the level of texts they are reading and the extent to which they are able to achieve general understanding. You can monitor your students' overall comprehension of their reading by incorporating extensive reading activities in the classroom. One idea, suggested by Iwano (2004), is that teachers briefly interview their students individually while the rest of the class is reading. For other useful activities for monitoring your students' extensive reading, see Bamford and Day (2004).

Additionally, it is a good idea to be familiar with the range of extensive reading materials available to your students. Being familiar with extensive reading materials and having an awareness of each student's level and reading interests will allow you to better help students while they expand their reading comfort zones; you can offer useful recommendations when students choose new books.

We should add a note of caution, however. Students can easily be confused about the balance between reading easy, enjoyable books and challenging themselves with books at a slightly higher level to expand their reading comfort zones. Because everyone has a desire to improve as quickly as possible, some learners might challenge themselves too much, too

soon. Thus, it is important to pay attention to what your students are reading and to make sure that they are not struggling with texts that are too difficult. It makes sense to help build learners' confidence and fluency with easier books, bearing in mind that books that were at one time too difficult will later become easier to read.

**Tip 9: Set reading goals and keep a reading log.**

Setting personal goals can often be a strong motivational factor. This is especially true for reading. Advise your students to consider their schedules and to set aside times to read (at lunch, before going to bed, etc.). You might want to help your students set a reasonable target number of books per week or month, as their schedules allow; encourage them to meet those goals. An extensive reading target can be expressed in pages, chapters, or even time—two hours a week, for example. Extensive reading targets are flexible and can be adjusted to fit the reading abilities and schedules of your students.

One way to set and monitor reading goals is to encourage, or require, your students to keep a log of their extensive reading. This will allow them (and you) to see their progress. Concrete, visible evidence can be very motivating. Two samples of simple extensive reading logs are provided in the Appendix. These can be modified according to the needs of your students and the extent to which you integrate extensive reading activities into your curriculum. Some teachers have found it useful to monitor extensive reading according to the weeks of a school semester (see Appendix, Form 1); others require students to provide a very brief summary of each book entered into the log in order to monitor general comprehension (see Appendix, Form 2).

**Tip 10: Enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!**

The more your students enjoy what they are reading, the more they will read. If they do not enjoy reading, their desire to stick with it will probably dwindle, and they may give up on reading. And they need to keep reading in order to improve their reading fluency and increase their vocabulary knowledge. Recall the motto of extensive reading: *reading gain without reading pain*.

As teachers, our goal is to spark our students' interest in reading and find encouraging ways to make sure they keep on reading. If you find that some of your students are starting to lose their enthusiasm, it might help to read aloud to them from a book that is easy, but captivating. Your enthusiasm when you read aloud can help them to get back into the frame of mind where they want to pick up a book at every opportunity.

### Conclusion

Most teachers, above all else, must help their students do well in their courses and pass the required examinations. However, at the same time, teachers can increase their students' competency in English and help them become fluent readers in English by engaging them in extensive reading. It is important to realize that the increased fluency, confidence, and motivation that so often result from reading extensively will help students in their academic endeavors, such as improving exam performances. As Colin Davis said: "Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present" (1995, 335).

We hope that these ten tips will help your students get the most out of reading extensively. When you provide insightful and careful orientation and guidance to extensive reading, you are not only helping your students improve many aspects of their overall reading and language ability; you also might be opening a door to the variety of worlds that reading can present.

We close with a tip for you, the teacher: Be a role model as a reader. Day and Bamford claim that "effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the

attitudes and behaviors of a reader." (2002, 140; emphasis in the original). If you are a first language reader of English, then consider reading extensively in your students' first language. If English is a foreign language to you, then read English with your students. As Nuttall observed, "reading is caught, not taught" (1996, 229).

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## APPENDIX | EXTENSIVE READING LOGS

Tips for Reading Extensively • *Leslie Ono, Richard Day, and Kenton Harsch*

### Form 1: Weekly Extensive Reading Log

BOOKS (OR PAGES) PER WEEK

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Week: \_\_\_\_\_

Target: \_\_\_\_\_ books / pages (circle one)

Date	Name of Book	Number of Pages Read	Comments

Total Read This Week: \_\_\_\_\_ books / pages (circle one)

## APPENDIX | EXTENSIVE READING LOGS

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### Form 2: Weekly Extensive Reading Log

HOURS PER WEEK

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Week: \_\_\_\_\_

Target: \_\_\_\_\_ hours per week

Date	Name of Book	Number of Pages Read	Comments

TOTAL READING TIME THIS WEEK: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Summary of / Responses to each book

Name of Book	Comments